

He was willing to lead another man's life—and he did!

Read this Story

BETWEEN Conniston, of His Majesty's Royal Northwest Mounted Police, and Keith, the outlaw, there was a striking physical and facial resemblance. It hovered in a subtle and unanalyzed presence that was constantly suggesting to Conniston a line of action that would have made him a traitor to his oath of duty. He represented the law. For twenty-seven months he had followed Keith, and always there has been in his mind that parting injunction of the splendid service of which he was a part—"Don't come back until you get your man, dead or alive."

Otherwise—
A racking cough split in upon his thoughts. He sat up on the edge of his cot, and at the gasping cry of pain that came with the red stain of blood on his lips, Keith went to him and with a strong arm supported his shoulders. He said nothing, and after a moment Conniston wiped the stain away and laughed softly.

"Thanks, old top," he said. "Thanks."
His fingers closed over the manacled-marked wrist. Over their heads the Arctic storm was crashing in a mighty fury, as if striving to beat down the little cabin that had dared to rear itself in the dun-gray emptiness at the top of the world, eight hundred miles from civilization.

"You'd better lie down," suggested Keith.
Conniston, instead, rose slowly to his feet and went to a table on which a seal-oil lamp was burning.

"It's queer, devilish queer," he said. "I was told to bring you in dead or alive—and at the end of the twenty-sixth month I got you alive. I froze, and I starved, and I drowned. I haven't seen a white woman's face in eighteen months. But I beat you at last. That's the jolly good part of it, Keith—I beat you and got you, and there's the proof of it on your wrists this minute. I won. Do you concede that? You must be fair, old top, because this is the last big game I'll ever play." There was a break; a yearning that was almost plaintive in his voice.

Keith nodded. "You won," he said. "You won so square that when the frost got your lung—"

"You didn't take advantage of me," interrupted Conniston. "That's the funny part of it, Keith. That's where the humor comes in. I had you all tied up and scheduled for the hangman. And instead of doing to me as I was going to do to you, instead of killing me or making your getaway while I was helpless—Keith—old pal—you've tried to nurse me back to life! Isn't that funny? Could anything be funnier?"

He reached a hand across the table and gripped Keith's. And then, for a few moments, he bowed his head while his body was convulsed by another racking cough.

"You see, I've got it figured out to the day," he went on, wiping away the stain with a cloth already dyed red. "This is Thursday. I won't see another Sunday. Then you'll have to dig a hole and bury me. After that you will no longer be held by the word of honor you gave me when I slipped off your manacles. And I'm asking you—what are you going to do?"

Over the table they looked into each other's eyes, and this time it was Keith's fingers that tightened about Conniston's. "Keith's face aged even as the dark Englishman stared at him. 'I suppose—I'll go back,' he said heavily.

"You mean to Coronation Gulf? You'll return to that stinking mess of Eskimo igloos? If you do, you'll go mad!" "I expect to," said Keith. "But it's the only thing left. You know that."

It was Conniston's turn to nod his head, slowly and thoughtfully. "Yes, of course," he agreed. "But they'll get you, even up there. And I'm sorry."

Their hands unclamped. Conniston filled his pipe and lit it.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I—like you. Do you know Keith, I wish we'd been born brothers and you hadn't killed a man. That night I slipped the ring-dogs on you I felt almost like a devil. I wouldn't say it if it wasn't for this badly lung. But what's the use of keeping it in the past? I'd make a topping good wager you're not the sort they make you out. And so I'd like to know—just why—you killed Judge Kirkstone?"

Keith's two fists knotted in the centre of the table. Conniston saw his blue eyes darken for an instant with a savage fire.

"What if I said I didn't kill Judge Kirkstone?"

"I'm after facts, and you can't lie to a dying man. Did you kill Judge Kirkstone?"

"I—don't know," replied Keith slowly, looking steadily into the other's eyes. "I think so, and yet I am not positive. I went to his home that night with the determination to wring justice from him or kill him. I wish you could look at it all with my eyes, Conniston. You could if you had known my father. From the time I was ten years old we were inseparable. I guess I was twenty before he told me of the deadly feud that existed between him and Kirkstone, and it never troubled me much—because I didn't think anything would ever come of it—until Kirkstone got him. Then I realized that all through the years the old rattle-snake had been watching for his chance. It was a frame-up from beginning to end, and my father stepped into the trap. My father got ten years. He was innocent. And the only man on earth who could prove his innocence was Kirkstone, the man who was glowing like a shroud over his wound of flesh. Conniston, if you had known these things and had been in my shoes, what would you have done?"

CONNISTON, lighting another taper over the oil flame, hesitated and answered: "I don't know yet, old chap. What did you do?"

"If ever a man begged for another man's life, I begged for my father's for the few weeks I had left. I begged for him free. He sat there, fat and oily, two big rings on his stubby fingers—a monstrous toad in human form—and he chuckled and laughed at me in his joy, as though I were a mountebank playing amusing tricks for him—and there my soul was bleeding itself out before his eyes! And his son came in, fat and oily and accursed like his father, and he laughed at me. I could still hear their gloating laughter when I stumbled out into the night. It haunted me. I heard it in the trees. It came in the wind. My brain was filled with it—and suddenly I turned back, and I went into that house again without knocking, and I faced the two of them alone once more in that room. And this time, Conniston, I went back to get justice—or to kill. Thus far it was premeditated, but I went with my naked hands."

Keith rose from the table and began to pace back and forth.

"The son began it," said Keith. "He sprang at me. I struck him. We grappled, and the beast himself leaped at me with some sort of weapon in his hand. The first blow almost broke my shoulder. In the scuffle I wrenched it from his hand, and then I found it was a long, rectangular bar of copper made for a paper-weight. In that same instant I saw the son snatch up a similar object from the table, and in the act he smashed the table light. In the darkness we fought. I did not feel that I was fighting men. They were monsters and gave me the horrible sensation of being in darkness with crawling serpents. Yes, I struck hard. And the son was striking, and neither of us could see. I felt my weapon hit, and it was then that Kirkstone crumpled down with a blubbery wheeze. The next morning only one copper-weight was found in that room. And the one that was left was covered with Kirkstone's blood and hair. Six months later my father died in prison, and for three years I've been hunted as a fox is hunted by the hounds."

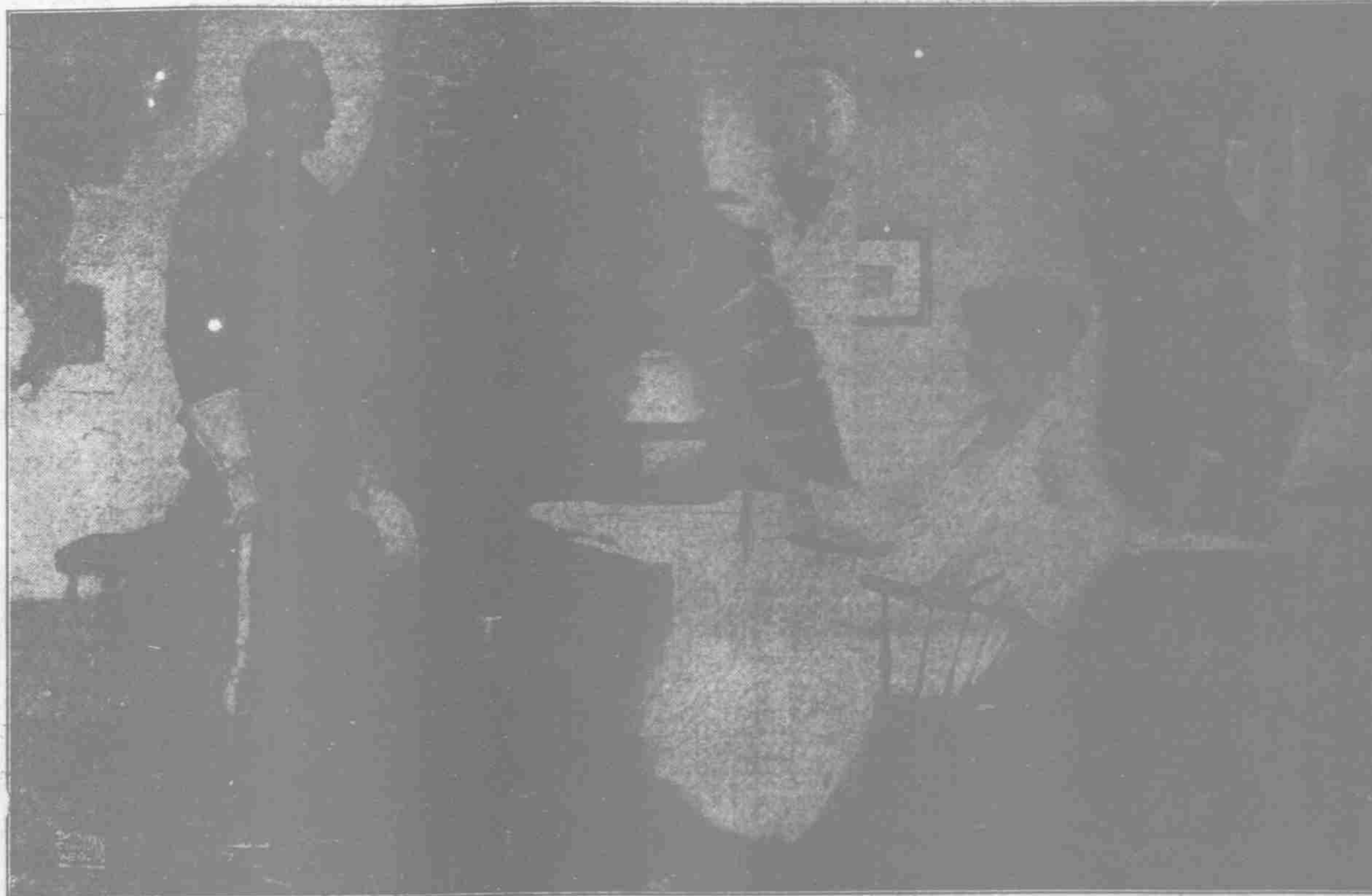
"Sit down!"
The Englishman's voice was commanding. Keith dropped back to his seat, breathing hard.

"Keith, when a man knows he's going to live, he is blind to a lot of things. But when he knows he's going to die, it's different. If you had told me that story a month ago, I'd have taken you down to the hangman just the same. It would have been my duty, you know, and I might have argued you were lying. But you can't lie to me—now. Kirkstone deserved to die. And so I've made up my mind what you're going to do. You're not going back to Coronation Gulf. You're going south. You're going back into God's country again. And you're not going as John Keith, the murderer, but as Derwent Conniston, of His Majesty's Royal Mounted Police! Do you get me, Keith? Do you understand?"

Keith simply stared. The Englishman twisted a mustache, a half-humorous gleam in his eyes.

"Quite a scheme, don't you think, old chap? Trim that mustache and beard of yours a little, and a bit of a scar over your right eye, and you can walk in on old McDowell himself, and I'll wager he'd jump up and say, 'Bless my heart, if it isn't Conniston.' That's all—I've got to leave you, Keith, a dead man's clothes and name. But you're welcome. They'll be no use to me after to-morrow."

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